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## Vincent Vlès. *Métastations. Mutations urbaines des stations de montagne. Un regard Pyrénéen*

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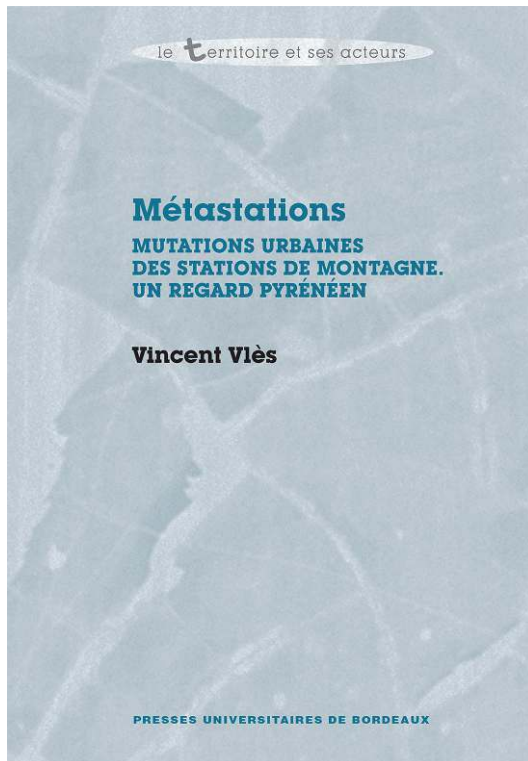
# Vincent Vlès. Métastations. Mutations urbaines des stations de montagne. Un regard Pyrénéen

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## REFERENCES

VLÈS V., 2014.– *Métastations. Mutations urbaines des stations de montagne. Un regard Pyrénéen*.  
Coll. Le territoire et ses acteurs, Ed. PUB (Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux), 180 p.



- 1 In the last few years Vincent Vlès, in the French academic literature, has become an unavoidable reference for the researchers and territorial planners working on tourism and ski industry and their effects on the territory. Although his geographical area of specialization mostly encompasses the Pyrenees and the Alps, his work and reflections are valid for the vast majority of the mountains areas of the Western world. In his last book, *Métastations*, Dr. Vlès is synthetizing and organizing in a single framework a large part of his contributions of the last decade.
- 2 The book starts by providing an extremely useful summary of the last forty years of studies and research on ski resorts and tourism as centers of local development (for instance Préau 1968; Guérin 1978; Knafo 1978; Perret 1992; Dewailly et Flament 2000; Veltz 2002; Wosniak 2006; Botti 2011 just to name a few). The author's next goal is to prove to the reader that the ski resort is a historical product, an entity that has not remained immutable across the years, and that, on the contrary, has evolved significantly in its structure but also in the way it is perceived, sold and consumed. The ski/mountain resort has represented a great many different things across the years: the small high class enclaves of the late nineteenth early twentieth century, the expanded –quasi industrial in size and structure– stations developed later on the mid twentieth century, the isolated stations of the higher valleys that created a small new city, or the village integrated resorts that rehabilitated –gentrified– an old almost abandoned rural community. In any case the resort is seen as a phenomenon integrated and that integrates space and human communities. The mountain resort is a quintessential product of modernity, a modernity characterized by the expansion of the urban model across the globe. As Vlès tells us, the resort is an urban and urbanizing structure that, paradoxically, is established as a place that claims to facilitate the rural and natural experience to large numbers of urban consumers. With such an idea in mind, Vlès wants to overcome an approach that analyzes mountain resorts in isolation, as islands adrift amidst a rural continuum, and as entities

that have an impact well beyond the territory of the commune or municipality where the runs are built. His explicit goal is to understand the mountain resorts as an integral part of the territory, and as elements that, in fact, contribute to redefine the landscape and its communities. Vlès, actualizing our approach to contemporary mountain resorts, claims that “notre société hypermoderne produit des lieux où les liens sociaux ne sont plus basés sur la concentration et la proximité géographiques. Ce phénomène transforme aussi les stations de montagne en *métastations*. Les espaces de vie qui les englobent remettent en cause les hiérarchies à la fois urbaines (villageoises, d’urbanisations limitées en altitude) et d’activités traditionnelles (notamment agropastorales) de la montagne.” (27).

- 3 In a hypermodern, postmaterialistic and predominantly urban Europe, the leisure economy has become a fundamental economic sector. The mountains have become a reservoir of sought-after commodities. The resorts do not only sell skiing landscapes anymore. In fact, statistics tell us that snow tourism has not been doing so well during the last twenty years (158). During the last twenty years the growing mountain tourism has integrated the historical background of the local communities as part of the leisure offered in the form of heritage. The resort still sells sport and adventure, but it has incorporated tradition (foods and street fairs), culture (museums), and nature (protected areas).
- 4 In this book Vlès proposes an analysis of the territorial integration of mountain resorts that intend to overcome past polarizing categorizations. The separation of resorts in two groups depending on the origin of its construction (endogenous versus exogenous) has been useful in the past, but has concealed the fact that all stations have showed some levels of urban mutation. This categorization is enriched by the inclusion of the analysis of the resorts of territory, governance and different spatial scales, environment, urbanism, and heritage and also part of the leisure economy. Vlès, in short, highlights the complexity of the phenomenon.
- 5 Finally, this book, published in 2014 includes stimulating reflections on the impacts of extremely recent events in the mountain tourism industry. I am referring here to the analysis of the consequences of the neoliberal economic crises that has swept Southern Europe during the last six to eight years in mountain resorts and mountain economy in general. This industry has faced a double challenge that affected two of its traditional funding sources. On the one hand the real estate industry has collapsed, completely in places like Spain, in a more moderate way in France. On the other hand the public administrations, traditional sources of funding of many tourist initiatives in peripheral areas of Western Europe have seen their resources drastically reduced. Local developers, tourist operators, decision makers, and all sort of local agents (public and private) are facing a completely new economic arena and, although some initiatives and resorts have collapsed and closed, many are developing new strategies to survive by diversifying their services and generating large institutional networks susceptible of creating economies of scale. The clientele and their habits have also been changing: a market traditionally dominated by very limited seasonal patterns shows signs of incorporating stationary population thanks to secondary or even primary residences (which definitely integrated the resorts in large urban networks).
- 6 Resorts have been changing since their inception, they have been, using Vlès terminology, mutating, and they are, as we speak, mutating. It is hard to predict the shape that the tourism industry will have in the future in the mountains of Western

Europe. Anyone interested in understanding the Western mountains, their economies, and their current processes of redefinitions should not miss Dr. Vlès' book.

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